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THE DAY FRAU SVOBODA PLAYED GOD

I heard the story from my brother Fred a year after it happened. The reason I had not witnessed the episode myself is that it took place in Vienna at a time when I lived in England, safe from the Nazis and their horror. My parents and brother had remained in Austria when, a year after the annexation to Germany, I was lucky in joining a youth transport which brought me to a town near London and a job that had been arranged for me by an acquaintance. Though utterly impoverished, I was now at least safe. But my people had to wait for an American permit to enter the United States. My own escape from "Greater Germany" in March 1939 and my family's continuing nightmare in Nazi-occupied Vienna until their own emigration in August constituted one of the countless family break-ups typical of these frightful times.

Thus I found myself living and working in England while my parents and Fred were still in Vienna, living in the same middle-class apartment building where I had spent my childhood. They were ready to leave the country after their documents were in order, but what they lived on is still a mystery to me even today. My father had lost his small business soon after the Nazis had taken over in March 1938. He had spent seven weeks in Dachau concentration camp as a consequence of the pogrom generally known as Crystal Night, having been released only after promising to leave the Ostmark "as soon as possible". The irony in this promise still fills me with bitter amusement: as if he would not have left without delay if only he could have done so.

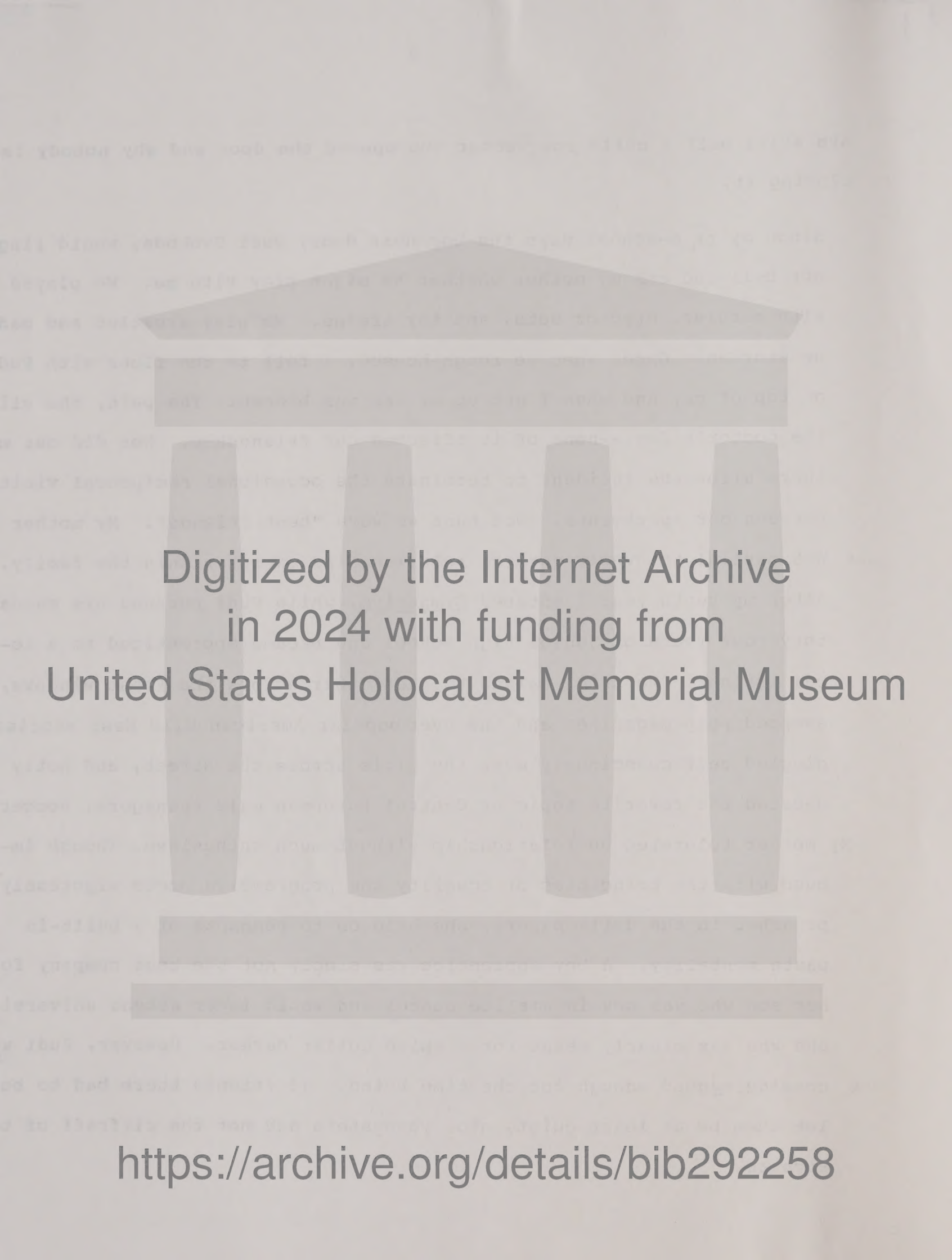
My father's American brothers had prepared one affidavit after another pledging not to let my family become a burden to the United States, but no affidavit was deemed financially adequate to suit the American authorities. This waiting game had dragged on for months and was not resolved

until about a week or so before the outbreak of World War II. Then at last my father and mother received an assurance the American consulate accepted as "sufficient". Nothing seemed to stand in the way of their departure. The date for the beginning of their Odyssey from Vienna to London, where they would visit me for a day, and then on to New York, was set for a day in the last week of August but I am not sure what specific day.

Until several months before the war started my family had been on neighborly if not cordial terms with the people next door, the Svobodas. There have always been, and still are, thousands of residents in Vienna with Czech names like Svoboda. I mention this because a large number of them, in an effort to cover up their non-German ethnic origin in a time of marked German nationalism, often outdid their fellow-citizens who bore German names like Mueller or Schmidt by posing as particularly militant patriotic hardliners. This meant that many of them were twice as loyal to the Nazi philosophy as Nazis of non-Slavic origin. Quite a few of my fellow-students in Gymnasium must be included in this group. The Svobodas, in the first few months after "Anschluss", were aloof but not visibly hostile. But starting in late 1938 they changed from being cool to being frozen, surely as a result of the deterioration in the treatment of the Jewish population after November 9, 1938. The ice age between our two families became increasingly hard to overlook after I had left for England in March 1939. This in itself was no rarity in Vienna. Many an "Aryan" neighbor turned frigid to next-door Jews, after having numerous chats and coffee breaks with them prior to the German take-over. Seemingly hearty relations undergoing a metamorphosis were in fact rather usual phenomena. When the same thing happened within a marriage relationship the tragedy was of course doubly devastating. The experience felt like opening the front door during a blizzard. The door stays open, and when you

are still half a child you wonder who opened the door and why nobody is closing it.

Since my pr_e-school days the boy next door, Rudi Svoboda, would ring our bell and ask my mother whether he might play with me. We played with marbles, erector sets, and toy trains. We play-wrestled and made up stories. Once, when we rough-housed, I fell to the floor with Rudi on top of me, and when I got up my arm was broken. The pain, the sling, the doctor's fee,--none of it affected our friendship. Nor did our mothers allow the incident to terminate the occasional reciprocal visits between our apartments. Not that we were "best friends". My mother ^{was} not partial to overly cordial relationships except within the family. After my tenth year I entered Gymnasium, while Rudi pursued his mandatory four years of junior high school and became apprenticed to a local artisan. We still talked to each other across the front windows, swapped pulp magazines and the ever popular American Wild West stories, giggled self-consciously over the girls across the street, and hotly debated the favorite topic of Central European male teenagers, soccer. My mother tolerated our relationship without much enthusiasm. Though imbued with the principles of equality the progressive press vigorously preached in the daily papers, she held on to remnants of a built-in caste mentality. A boy apprentice was simply not the best company for her son, who was now in an elite school and would later attend university and who was clearly meant for a white collar career. However, Rudi ^{was} considered good enough for the time being. If friends there had to be, let them be at least quiet, nice youngsters and not the riffraff of the streets.



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This state of affairs continued for about four years; then Rudi simply dropped out of my life. He was learning a trade of some sort, and I entered the upper division of my humanistic lyceum. Even before the fateful March 11, 1938, when German troops filled the streets, a cooling-off period had set in. The two mothers hardly exchanged audible good-mornings, and one day my startled mother informed us that Frau Svoboda had turned her head on the staircase. There had been no outward sign of a break; no quarrel; just a polarization which occurred simultaneously with the surge of anti-Semitism and underground Nazi activities everywhere. Rudi's visits had stopped some time ago, but now he refused to answer my "hello" when we met in the house.

What had happened? To answer this question, the history of the country between the end of democracy in 1933 and the overthrow of the government in early 1938 would have to be included in this report. But to do this is not my purpose. Only a seminar in the events of this half decade can do justice to the problem.

The Svobodas of this world needed only a modicum of economic insecurity, a Jewish neighbor with educational ambitions, an opportunity closed to themselves, and a bare minimum of anti-Semitism, which was always in the air, to awaken the latent inclination of Nazi ideology which had waited for Hitler as the damsel waited for the kiss of the prince.

And then it came. The weekend of March 11--March 13, 1938, welcomed by many, feared by some, lamented by the ^{most} obvious candidates for a future of misery, the Jews. It was, as we know now, the beginning of the endless night for millions of people. All this has been covered in history books. Far better to turn to another aspect of this memoir, my mother's finest hour. She was a proud and feisty woman, not without fault as we have seen, but determined and strong in her knowledge that harsh times demand hard fighters.

Her courage could be shown best on the occasion when she pleaded for my father's release from Dachau by simply walking into Gestapo headquarters and pointing out her husband's war injuries sustained in 1915 and his unblemished life. The flabbergasted official had surely not witnessed such a scene very often. He advised her to write to Hitler personally, which she promptly did. That my father was released in early 1939 was in all probability not the result of that letter. I have always compared this kind of bravery to ^{I witnessed} the scene of an Austrian woman expostulating with a Soviet colonel about her husband's incarceration in Siberia. With what results of course I do not know. The dreaded house on Mortzin Platz certainly had not many such visitors.

I mention my mother's courage because of what followed in the Svoboda matter. What led up to the climax in that drama was first of all the good news of the green light my parents received for emigrating, in the form of an adequate affidavit. I learned of this development in England and was overjoyed. In my British haven I could imagine how passionately happy my three closest relatives must have been the day the State Department approval arrived. The sixteen months under Nazi rule were intolerably bad, for life in Austria was getting worse by the day for those the regime persecuted. My brother told me later, when we were in safety in Atlanta, how the three of them counted the days and hours until they could board the train which would take them to points west, until they would reach New York, where one of my uncles would welcome them. They were sharply mindful in those last hot days of August 1939 that every night, after another day had passed without disaster, brought them nearer to the time of departure. Last minute catastrophes were not unknown in other families in similar circumstances: sudden illness, denunciation by former cleaning ladies, unforeseen and unpredictable

arrests,--these were examples of the kind of tragedy that had happened to others. When it seemed, as my brother told me one evening in Atlanta when the war had already moved into its second year, by the third week of August that my family would "make it", one of these grim possibilities of last minute disasters became a sudden reality. I have always wondered whether Frau Svoboda had got wind of the expected departure of her Jewish neighbors or whether her sudden action was simply spite and infamy, unrelated to the imminent flight from Austria by her neighbors. One day, close to the time the emigration was planned for, Frau Svoboda, who so far had been hostile but silent except for occasional cynical grimaces but without other signs of ill-will, turned into the sort of dangerous enemy my people had envisaged in their nightmares. Frau Svoboda loudly proclaimed from her window that my mother had made "provocative faces" at her. It was bad enough, she shrieked, to have to live next door to Jews, but to expect an "Aryan" to have to put up with insolent grimacing when the rest of Vienna was already emptying itself of the Jewish presence was too much. Such were the outpourings of her feverish mind. It did not take my parents long to see the piranha-like probabilities of this turn of events. Whether Frau Svoboda believed her own paranoid accusation or whether she invented the scowls and leers on my mother's face, the danger she posed was real and frightening. Although by mid-1939 it was not yet clear that by remaining in Nazi Austria a person of the Jewish persuasion would jeopardize his or her life--the "final solution" and mass extermination were not yet in operation--it was plain enough that leaving the country as quickly as possible was vitally important. If our neighbor were to denounce my family on the slightest and most absurd grounds, for only a mad or suicidal Jewish person would make provocative gestures or faces at a non-Jewish neighbor, the local party official

would at the very least make it impossible to meet the deadline for departure. But no such delay was thinkable. It was a blessing that my parents did not know that if their departure was even temporarily impeded by fiat of the Nazi party, in all likelihood they would never have a second chance of leaving. The bureaucratic nightmare of changing sailing reservations in the midst of the nausea of existence under Nazi rule would almost certainly have made their emigration impossible, even if my parents had had the financial means of eking out a living for a few more months. They had no such means. Life in a non-Jewish apartment house under the best of circumstances was precarious, even for us who were in fact quite popular. Only because my family had a very good reputation on the block could they hold out as long as sixteen months without being thrown into the street. The other blessing consisted in my parents' ignorance that Hitler would invade Poland a few days later. My mother's nerves, despite her well-known stamina, could hardly have stood up to such a shock. Although most people felt that war was a strong possibility, my mother and father had no way of realizing how close they came to being caught in the snake pit.

A week or so later, when the three of them were bound for New York, they must have trembled in the knowledge of how near they came to sharing the fate of my mother's siblings who lost their lives in the next five years. With the borders now closed tight, there would have been no chance of escape, even if the Hauswart, the Nazi block warden, had refrained from pursuing a lengthy investigation, which was not at all impossible in view of the good relations we had had with him in the pre-Nazi years.

Frau Svoboda meanwhile, with the instinct of a raptor, knew that she

held the destiny of my relatives in her hands. She was sharply mindful of the power she had over three people, as was evident in her behavior which resembled the Schadenfreude of the professional gambler who held all the trump cards. There is little doubt that she was also aware of her option to apply to the local party office in case the Hauswart failed to play her game. My family was as much in her power as the prey in the jaws of the predator. My mother in turn was conscious of being at her mercy for people had been denounced for far less than ^{an} allegedly "provocative attitude". My mother told me much later how she felt being in the power of a sycophant who could prevent her escape from what later proved to be almost certain death.

After a few more days, during which Frau Svoboda continued her strident accusations and while the day of departure drew ever closer, my mother experienced panic and naked fear. This was a lot worse than seeing the Gestapo officer and begging for my father's release. This was jealousy, hatred, and sadism carried on by a once trusted neighbor bent on my people's destruction, while the Gestapo officer was a party hack, albeit formidable in rank and terrifying in his potential power. Here was, in contrast, a woman who had changed a putative benevolence into a gloating enmity.

I still try to imagine the agony it cost my mother to come to her decision. She must capitulate. Like the ruler of a defeated but innocent country, she must bend her knee and present her neck to the victor. My brother told me, as we sat in safety in wartime America, of our mother's abject surrender and apology. She must have tasted every ounce of hurt pride, ravished honor and utter humiliation. Both women knew how baseless the accusation was and realized, as have so many millions of people throughout history, that, sadly, might does sometimes make right.

Nine years after the war I went back to Vienna on academic business.

I knew I had to see the place again so I got it over with on the second

day of my visit. The apartment was of course occupied by strange tenants. As I glanced up to the first floor windows I saw Frau Svoboda looking out as if time had stood still and she had been looking out for nine long years. She obviously recognized me after a minute or two. What were her thoughts? Was she perhaps afraid that I would call in the French occupation troops whose headquarters were nearby? The French were not as harsh as the Soviets but in the early years of the occupation it was possible that they might hunt down those whom victims of Nazi rule denounced. But the very word denounced felt like arsenic on my tongue, although in my case denunciation was morally justified, unlike Frau Svoboda's denunciation would have been had my mother not swallowed her pride nine years ago. While my thoughts were on this point, Frau Svoboda continued to meet my eyes, probably wondering what was coming next. I decided then and there not to apply to the French command post down the street. Perhaps I was in part motivated by fear that if the French officers did not take action against her, which was by no means to be ruled out, I would be humiliated again, this time in a way which I saw no way of ever living down. I never did find out whether my reporting Frau Svoboda would have done any good. And when after a while I discovered from the local butcher, who greeted me with sincere pleasure, that Rudi Svoboda had been killed in action on the Russian front, I tossed the whole ghastly thing out of my mind and returned to my hotel.

Robert Schwarz
Palm Beach, Florida, 2001

